

BARBARA ROGOFF. *The Cultural Nature of Human Development*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. xiii + 434 pp.

*Reviewed by* Inger Mey

Central in Barbara Rogoff's exciting and groundbreaking work on the cultural nature of human development is the dialectical relationship between the individual and society. Rogoff develops her own theory about human development as a cultural process, taking her theoretical inspiration from Lev S. Vygotskij and Alexej N. Leont'ev in the development of their cultural-historical and activity theories. The author's methodological tools are based on her training in psychology and anthropology, with the latter's emphasis on ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation in small local communities. Vygotskij and Leont'ev both applied the dialectics of Marxism to explain the relationships between the cognitive development of the individual and the changing elements and institutions of the community in which the individual is an active member. Barbara Rogoff takes these important ideas and uses them as a starting point for a breathtaking tour of many cultures on many continents, and gives us wonderful illustrations, both in words and images, of how individuals and their cultural practices interact and change in emerging dynamic participation.

In the first part of the book (chapters 1, 2, and 3), Rogoff discusses and critiques the theoretical and methodological premises of previous generations of scholars interested in the development of the human mind. She points out that most of the research to date has come from middle-class communities in Europe and North America, and that such research has been assumed to generalize to all people. In the absence of contrasting data from other cultures, authors seem to take their own cultural institutions for granted, viewing differences found in other cultures as deficits. This research also tends to regard the individual as an independent entity, separate from the world, with inherent characteristics which progress according to certain developmental stages. These inherent characteristics might be 'influenced' by culture. Culture likewise is thought of as a monolithic entity, creating uniform members and 'essential' cultural traits.

In contrast to this, Rogoff presents Vygotskij's cultural-historical approach, which 'assumes that individual development must be understood in, and cannot be separated from, its social and cultural-historical context' (p. 50). Important in her argument is the notion of 'cultural tools for thinking' which children acquire in the presence of skilled and experienced members of the culture, the acquisition taking place in what Vygotskij calls 'the zone of proximal development'. Rogoff agrees with other scholars working in the Vygotskian tradition that individual and cultural processes are mutually constituting, rather than defined separately from each other. The valuable contribution that Rogoff adds to this insight is the precise way in which she sees this process of mutual constituting as taking place. In order to emphasize the simultaneity of individual and cultural processes, she positions these processes within participation in sociocultural activities. As people participate in, and contribute to, cultural activities, their involvement brings about changes in both the activities and the participants, just like it has changed the people, the tools, and the practices through generations in the history of the community. Rogoff illustrates this multifaceted process by calling on different aspects of 'the participation perspective' (p. 52). Employing different analytical views of a situation: personal and interpersonal, and focusing on the cultural aspects of an ongoing process, she teases out individual, social, cultural, and historical elements that interact simultaneously and dialectically. In this way, Rogoff manages to eliminate the nature /culture dichotomy: inherent and acquired elements interact happily in this participation framework. Communities are not limited to ethnic or national groups, and individuals can participate in more than one community.

Rich ethnographic written materials and pictures lend authority to the different chapters in this book. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 give detailed insights into many different child-rearing practices and how these practices make sense in terms of the communities in which they are found. Ecological, cultural, and historical circumstances play important roles in shaping values, practices and activities around children, their families and communities. In her chapter (5) on the various phases of a lifetime, Rogoff discusses the concept of age and how it corresponds

to the individual's roles in different cultures. Interdependence and autonomy are also important concepts in assessing the value different communities place on how to bring up their children, and what personal characteristics are particularly respected in adhering to the local moral code.

Learning to think, and learning various skills, are the topics of chapters 7 and 8. Rogoff and other cognitive scientists follow Vygotskij in positing that individual cognitive skills derive from people's engagement in sociocultural activities. Rather than representing a general ability, cognition appears to be 'situated' in specific contexts, and learned through specific cultural activities. Rogoff demonstrates that children exposed to 'Western Schooling' show a variety of skills that resemble the activities of the school, and do well on tests of classification and memory, which are two of the elements focused on in 'Western Schools' (p. 242). Cultural tools for thinking, like literacy and mathematics in the western world, were developed in conjunction with practices and affordances in the respective cultures. The invention of writing was dependent on the availability of a good writing surface; and the invention and manufacturing of paper came about through individual and social efforts as well as ecological opportunities. Non-western communities have different cultural tools, which codify local knowledge: taxonomies for classification of plants and animals, navigational tools, and narrative structures specifically adapted to oral tradition. The idea that cognition takes place across a wide variety of personal, interpersonal, and socio-cultural fields (and not just within the heads of people) makes it possible to suggest a theory of collaborative cognition, distributed across individuals and tools in a dynamic participation framework of activity, as developed by Hutchins in his book *Cognition in the Wild*. (Ed Hutchins, MIT Press, 2000).

Inspired by Vygotskij's 'zone of proximal development', Rogoff's form of apprenticeship is called 'guided participation in cultural endeavors' (p. 282). 'Guiding' is a concept that goes beyond instruction, and can be used in acquiring both desirable and undesirable skills. Guiding can take the form of teasing, or shaming undesirable behavior, as well as prompting through nonverbal modes of expression: gestures, facial expressions, and body postures. Experts

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guide participating novices by trying to bridge the different perspectives they each bring to the situation, or by structuring their participation for them.

This book is interesting for, and useful to, a variety of academic fields, in particular Linguistic Anthropology, for several reasons. The development of individual cognition through participation in local activities takes place through interaction, through the local language of the specific community. This local language, with its own specific structure, grammar, and lexicon, was developed historically by the members of the language community, through verbal and non-verbal activities in which the members participated actively, i.e. through language use. Because language and its use are an integral part of human development, Rogoff's theory of how humans acquire cognitive skills also involves the acquisition of language.

The wealth of ethnographic examples given in each chapter makes the book valuable to anthropologists and non-anthropologists alike. Within the various fields informed by this book, it is suitable in graduate as well as undergraduate courses. For scholars well acquainted with both Vygotskij's and Rogoff's work, though, the arguments may tend to be somewhat repetitive, a trend Rogoff's book shares with lots of other lengthy volumes.

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